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RUEHNE/AMEMBASSY NEW DELHI PRIORITY 4070
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BANGKOK 005203

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DEPARTMENT FOR EAP, EAP/MLS
PACOM FOR FPA (HUSO)

E.O. 12958: DECL: 08/22/2016

TAGS: ASEC PINS MOPS PGOV TH

SUBJECT: CAR BOMB DISCOVERED NEAR PRIME MINISTER'S RESIDENCE

REF: A. BANGKOK 5158

1B. BANGKOK 4610

Classified By: DCM Alexander A. Arvizu. Reason 1.4 (b)

11. (C) Summary: On August 24, Police defused a large car bomb in the neighborhood of Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra's residence and arrested an Army Lieutenant who works for a controversial retired Army Major General, Panlop Pinmanee. General Panlop has been dismissed from his position as Deputy Director for the Internal Security Operation Command (ISOC). Thaksin called an immediate meeting of top military and police officials. Officials at the Ministry of Defense (MOD) appeared surprised by news of the arrest during a meeting with JUSMAG. Some sources speculate that the story is a set-up to gain sympathy for the PM, or even to provide an excuse for him to declare a state of emergency; this would enable him to clamp down on protest and opposition activity. We do not rule out the possibility of an assassination plot against the PM, but elements of this alleged assassination attempt raise obvious questions. End Summary

12. (C) At approximately 0830 in the morning on August 24, police discovered containers packed with urea fertilizer, fuel oil, and dynamite sticks in a car in the neighborhood of Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra's residence, along the normal route of his motorcade. (According to some reports, the PM's security detail had contacted police and asked them to locate a vehicle that they had seen acting suspiciously.) A Police EOD team defused the explosive device with a water cannon. They provided RSO with a description of the bomb. They reported that the back seat and the truck of the car contained about 60 kgs of anfo (mixed urea fertilizer and fuel oil), several pounds of TNT and C4, det cord and a remote detonator. They told RSO that the bomb would have caused damage for an estimated one square kilometer. Thai Army Lieutenant Thawatchai Klinchana, the car's owner, was arrested, apparently returning to the car to move it from the parking space. Police speculate that the car was parked along the normal route PM Thaksin travels in the morning. They say that Thaksin left earlier than expected this morning. Therefore, driver may gotten to the site too late, and returned to move the car to a safer location. An Army contact confirmed to Emboffs that Lt. Thawatchai worked as a driver/security guard for Internal Security Operation Command (ISOC) Deputy Director Major General (ret.) Panlop Pinmanee.

Press reports and military contacts say that General Panlop was immediately dismissed from ISOC. Panlop denied any involvement in an attempt on the PM's life, saying, "You know me. If I were behind it, I would not have missed." (Comment: Although the military is polarized over the PM (ref B), Panlop has not been identified by anyone as an anti-Thaksin activist. On the contrary, he is widely reported to be close to Thaksin. Further background on Panlop is in para 5.)

¶3. (C) JUSMAGCHIEF was attending a briefing at MOD with senior Thai military officials when an aide, carrying a police mug shot of LT Thawatchai, entered the room to notify Permanent Secretary General Sirichai Thanyasiri about the arrest. Sirichai excused himself to brief Defense Minister GEN Thammarak Isarangura Na Ayutthaya. MOD officials appeared agitated on hearing about the possible bombing attempt. There was no indication that the officers present had foreknowledge of the incident. A few minutes later, General Thammarak left MOD in a motorcade to go to Government House. According to media reports, Thaksin summoned the top military and police leadership to an urgent meeting at Government House.

COMMENT

¶4. (C) Many of our contacts are expressing skepticism about the story, and are concerned that the whole incident may have been fabricated to gain Thaksin sympathy, or even to give him an excuse to declare a state of emergency in Bangkok, to clamp down on political and protest activity against him which has dominated recent headlines. "Planting" a large bomb seems like an extreme measure, but Thaksin is fighting for his political life. According to press reports, the

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deputy Thai Rak Thai spokesman was quoted noting the connection of General Panlop to anti-Thaksin activist, former General Chamlong (a military academy classmate), as well as to former Democrat Party head Chuan Leekphai. We certainly don't rule out the possibility that there could be an assassination plot against the controversial PM, or even that some military officers could be involved. However, there are some aspects of the story that don't seem to make sense. There does not seem to be any reason for General Panlop, or for the driver arrested, to take the lead in such an assassination attempt. The bomb would have caused damage in such a wide area, with a possibility of many civilian casualties -- something that seems out of character for the military. Nonetheless, we believe that our police EOD sources (who were trained by ATA and in the US) have honestly reported to us what they found. This will certainly have a very serious, and probably very negative effect, on the efforts to resolve the political crisis. END COMMENT

BACKGROUND - MAJ. GENERAL (RET.) PANLOP PINMANEE

¶5. (C) Major General (ret.) Panlop achieved notoriety following the April 28, 2004 Krue Se Mosque incident. Panlop was the officer in charge at the Mosque when Muslim militants barricaded themselves inside after attacking a nearby military checkpoint. Panlop ignored a direct order from then-Deputy Prime Minister Chawalit Yongchaiyudh to surround the Mosque but not attack. Panlop ordered a Special Forces team into the historic Mosque; 31 militants were killed in the raid. Following the incident - which was widely criticized by human rights groups - Chavalit fired Panlop from his military command, but PM Thaksin allowed him to keep his position in ISOC. Panlop has been involved in other controversial actions. He was part of a group of "young Turks" in the military who staged a failed coup d'etat during the 1980s against then-Prime Minister Prem Tinsulanonda. Panlop is well known within the military as having hawkish views, and he has urged a harsh crackdown on militants in

southern Thailand.

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